

# **Nostalgia, Shame and the Transplanted Cuban: *'la cubana arrepentida'***

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## **Use of literature in illuminating shame**

Literature can illuminate and extend our understanding of the affect of shame. In this paper, I will use extracts from my fictional works, published and in progress, and other fictional work and poetry by Cuban and Cuban-American writers to illustrate some aspects of shaming in relation to the experience of being a Cuban-American migrant in the United States, particularly relative to the sense of exilic nostalgia for the lost homeland. I will also look at how shame is used by the minority culture to control, erode or slow the process of assimilation and to try to maintain the illusion of the superiority of the minority culture.

Humanist psychoanalyst Carl Goldberg specifies that the word 'shame' designates 'internalised and unrecognised shame as well as feeling ridiculous, humiliated, chagrined, mortified, shy, reticent, painfully self-conscious, inferior and inadequate', and differentiates between being shamed and being ashamed, the latter denoting incidents where the person himself is the main source of critical assault on self-esteem (1991, xvii). Paradoxically, it is because shame revolves around the self that it can be inspired by acts not committed by the self but by a social group with which the self is connected. In the current reconciliation debate in Australia, the philosopher Raymond Gaita has written that '...though guilt may be plausibly limited to what one has done, shame cannot be. People can feel ashamed of their parents, their friends, their church and their country, even though they played no role in what they feel ashamed of' (1997). Likewise, Goldberg states that 'unlike shame, one does not feel guilty for events and actions (even those involving oneself) which were not in one's control or choosing' (1991, 56). This is

an excellent and crucial distinction, and, if thought through carefully, goes a long way towards clearing up some of the confusion between shame and guilt. Shame attaches to the self, and so it is possible to feel ashamed of other things that also attach to the self: one's friends, country, family, school, race, etc. Guilt, on the other hand, is more circumscribed and demarcated – it has to do with an action. If one didn't do it, one generally won't feel guilty about it.

### **Some linguistic limitations in the shame-guilt tango (tangle)**

In the realm of language and culture, one has to say that shame, the word available in the English language, is inadequate to its manifold descriptive tasks. Spanish offers *vergüenza* and *deshonra*, both of which work as nouns and verbs, as well as the noun *pudor*, which conveys a sense of modesty closely affiliated with the English-language sense of bodily shame. Spanish also allows for distinguishing between shame related to personal acknowledgement of regret or wrongdoing, as opposed to just sympathy for another's disappointment, so that 'what a shame your day isn't going well,' becomes *es una pena que ...* or *qué lástima que...* (the word shame therefore doesn't have to enter into it). Shame theorists have pointed out that other languages have several terms for what English attempts to embrace with the one word. Greek has *aischyne*, *aeikes*, *entropē*, *elencheie*, and *aidos*, while German has *Scham* and *Schande* and French offers *honte* and *pudeur* (Schneider 1977, 18, 145).

While we defend against shame personally, we are quick to try to inflict it on others. Part of this is linguistic expediency. It can be said that a certain person, act or belief is *shameful*, but not that it, he or she is *guiltful*. Perhaps through arbitrary custom, we never say 'guilt on you'. Interestingly, although guilt is rarely (and only incorrectly) used as a verb, it is twice used in this way by Ricardo Ortíz in his exploration of guilt and nostalgia in a trans-cultural Cuban-American context, '*Café, Culpa* and *Capital: Nostalgic Addictions of Cuban Exile*' (1997). Ortíz writes 'the Cuban mother guilt(s) her son' and later mentions 'motherly guilt(ing)' (parenthesis his), referring to a mother's reaction to perceived abandonment (1997, 64). Perhaps these linguistic liberties are facilitated by the many instances where sentiment is either forcefully or less than comfortably translated from Spanish to English in cross-cultural investigations.

If language first constructs and then reflects experience, then the paucity of words that describe different phenomena in English presently lumped together as shame, coupled with the confusion surrounding the meaning of shame, indicates that as a concept it is itself in a state of flux, and that the work of construction is not yet complete – in fact, has only just begun. Wurmser, who has done much to further an understanding of shame, hints at this when he writes of the benefits of interpreting human experience through several languages. He writes: ‘Not only is it true that “Who does not know another language, does not know his own” (Goethe), but I strongly feel that to learn a new language means to live in a new form and to see the world in an unaccustomed light (*apprendre une langue, c’est vivre de nouveau*)’ (1981, xii).

The work of constructing meaning via a search for forms of language and texts that enhance our understanding of the emotional state of shame and the effects of shaming is an ongoing project. It is important if we are to clearly and correctly apprehend the effects of shaming on others, particularly children. In turn, as a writer, it is one of my objectives to understand and advocate practices that are constructive, rather than destructive, of the emerging self. In the novel I am now finishing and in my earlier novel *The Rooms in My Mother’s House* (1996), I have seen the depiction of the effects of shaming as something desirable and worthwhile.

### **The hyphen**

In *Life on the Hyphen*, Gustavo Pérez Firmat refers to what Cuban sociologist Rubén Rumbaut called the ‘1.5’ generation, the generation born in Cuba but which was educated and came of age in the United States. Rumbaut argued that members of this generation were marginal to both the old and new worlds and not fully a part of either (1994, 4). Pérez Firmat, however, is mostly interested in looking at the benefits accrued from this intermediate position. He writes that the one-and-a-halfers, (a category to which I seem to belong, having been born in Cuba but raised in Miami) have a unique ability to negotiate the new culture by virtue of their intercultural placement. ‘One-and-a-halfers are no more American than they are Cuban – and vice versa’ writes Pérez Firmat (1994, 6). ‘Spiritually and psychologically you are neither *aquí* nor *allá*, you are neither Cuban nor Anglo’ (1994, 7). He asserts that while this is not a choice freely made, it does create the conditions for ‘distinctive cultural achievement’ (1994, 7), and he examines the

contributions to culture made by Ricky Ricardo, Gloria Estefan and Oscar Hijuelos, among others. In this paper, however, I want to look again at the difficulties inherent in this position, difficulties Pérez Firmat fleetingly acknowledges when he writes that one-and-a halfers 'may never feel entirely at ease' in either the old or new cultures (1994, 5).

In a strong critique of Pérez Firmat, Max Castro argues that the 'deliciously seductive' *Life on the Hyphen* 'manages to systematically underplay, elude or ignore the conflict-laden and asymmetric aspects of the relation Cuba(n)/America(n)' (2000, 293). Castro makes the point that much of Pérez Firmat's argument about Cuban-American(ness) rests on the popular assumption, seemingly accepted by Pérez Firmat, that the 'Cuban-American comes into existence when he is gazed at by the U.S. public: To be (Cuban-American) is to be perceived (by the American)' (2000, 294). Castro points out the unequal power distribution between the migrant group and the 'host' country, an inequality that I believe predisposes the Cuban minority to shame and the American majority to arrogance and shaming. Although not explicitly exploring shame or shaming, Castro refutes that there is a 'carnal affair' between the two groups, pointing instead to the many instances of 'unrequited love' by the non-Cuban Americans for their Cuban counterparts, as evidenced most dramatically in a 1997 *Miami Herald* poll that gave post-1980 Cuban migrants the most negative rating of any migrant group (2000, 300).<sup>1</sup> Castro writes: 'Cuban-Americans may believe that Cuban + American is a viable, even ideal formula, but many non-Cuban-Americans continue to voice their disagreement in the strongest terms' (2000, 302).

Castro traces much of the disparagement of the Cuban culture (which I believe is tantamount to shaming) to the economic success and political empowerment of the migrant group 'in a single generation, a process probably without parallel in American history' and describes how this process amounts to 'a major transgression against unstated ... Anglo assumptions about immigrant and Latino subordination' (2000, 303). Castro traces several reasons for Anglo resentment of Cuban-Americans: their economic success and how that success has resulted in Cuban control over Miami's government and destiny, which in turn has led to Anglo backlash and black anger, reinforcing ethnic lines of division (2000, 303). The resultant 'disparaging view of the Latino other' (Castro

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<sup>1</sup> The poll in question is written up in 'Immigrants from Cuba Facing Image Problems, Poll Shows,' *Miami Herald*, June 16, 1997.

2000, 304), I argue, manifests in many small and large instances of shaming and attempts to shame.

Pamela Maria Smorkaloff, in *Cuban Writers On and Off the Island*, conceptualises and problematises the literary contribution of the hyphenated, Cuban-American writer. She writes extensively about the urge to idealise the past on the island through nostalgia, something explored in many novels about Cuban exile, including my *The Rooms in My Mother's House* (1996), Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and Oscar Hijuelos's *Empress of the Splendid Season* (1999). In *The Rooms in My Mother's House*, I write that Consuelo first re-encounters her lost true love, Daniel,

...at the Miami Dade Auditorium where the first of the annual nostalgic extravaganzas – *Añorada Cuba* – was being staged. That was where she saw him, in the foyer where she nervously waited for Pedro to buy the tickets. She was nervous because they should not have been there. They scarcely had enough money for two meals; they needed clothes and furniture and a million other things and she knew it was simply insane. Yet the program, *Our Beloved and Much-missed Cuba*, seemed to promise some relief from an even deeper hunger. So she waited desperately, hopefully, and the children felt her anxieties, as always, so that Carlos darted about her legs in a little white shirt too small for him, and Ana, in a lacy dress with many flounces that was also too small and which Consuelo had hand sewn in Cuba in another lifetime, stood staring about her and biting her nails to the quick. Consuelo wore her one good dress, a green and yellow sheath like the upholstery on a sofa, too warm for a Florida winter. Her gaze was severe and unhappy. She was calling to Carlos to come stand at her side when she raised her eyes and saw him, stared in disbelief, and then faltered, leant against a pillar, lowered her eyes and waited for Pedro.

*Añorada Cuba* indeed. (1996, 272).

I am writing about nostalgia as it is defined in the *Macquarie Dictionary* (1995) as ‘a longing and a desire for home, family and friends, or the past’. Interestingly, *Webster's* defines nostalgia as something more lethal: ‘Homesickness; esp., a severe and sometimes fatal form of melancholia, due to homesickness’ (1998). While there are no fatalities due to nostalgia in my writing, there is a greatly impaired sense of self. The night after seeing Daniel at *Añorada Cuba*, Consuelo has a particularly troubled and sleepless night, where she seems to fall away from time, so disconcerted is she by her situation:

She has stumbled through an unknown door. She is somewhere else, not where she thought she was, but in the past. She is in Cuba, in a marble-tiled house in El Vedado... There is the window...

She stands like this for many seconds, for minutes, for a very long time, for years that spin backward, for the erasing of years. She does not think about anything at all. She allows herself to rest in the past. The night streams past her, dreamlessly. (1996, 273-74)

Here, as in Hijuelos' *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989), nostalgia for the lost

homeland is coupled with lost love, serving to accent and intensify the sense of life mis-lived, opportunities missed and the wrong road taken. All of these factors erode the migrant's self esteem and compound a sense of inferiority and 'wrongness', leading to a diffuse but debilitating shame in Goldberg's sense of the word as designating, among other things, feelings of being 'ridiculous, humiliated, chagrined, mortified, shy, reticent, painfully self-conscious, inferior and inadequate' (1991, xvii).

The need to mythologise the lost homeland and the lost love, to elevate these to unrealistic and glorified spheres, is part of a reaction to the shame of feeling chagrined and inadequate (i.e. shameful) in the new land. Although not referring to shame but to the related concept of guilt, Ortíz makes the point that Cuba and *culpa* (culpability or guilt) have been juxtaposed by both the Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante (1994, 4)<sup>2</sup> and the Cuban singer Albita. Ortíz writes: 'That one's Cubanness should become the marker of one's guilt, the incontrovertible sign of one's culpability, results precisely from the necessity of bearing that mark, of confessing to one's Cubanity, *outside* Cuba' (1997, 70). Ortíz describes 'the nostalgizing practices in Cuban-exile literature and culture' arguing that 'in and out of exile', Cubans are caught in a chronic addiction to 'fantasies of return, reunification and restitution...' (1997, 70).

In drama of nostalgia, the self, under attack in a situation for which it was not prepared, lacking in knowledge of language and cultural mores, and further facing prejudice from the 'host' people, looks to a lost self, wholly idealising it. As well, the self idealises the country and the loves left behind as a reaction against the prevalent, amorphous and debilitating shame of the new existence. The mythologising of the lost homeland can be seen simply as nostalgia, but nostalgia is never just a hankering for the old; it is mixed and cannot be separated from feelings in and for the present. This is again illustrated in the following passage from *The Rooms in My Mother's House* (1996), where Consuelo is dragging her sick children through the Miami streets and comparing those streets unfavourably to Havana's boulevards: (earlier the narrator comments that 'Miami, unlike Havana, was not considerate towards pedestrians' [1996, 265]):

Consuelo thought of the life she had lost. She thought of her stylish dresses and leather pumps and the pearls that had adorned her neck. She thought that she should be strolling along El Malecon at this time of the day, with Ana in an expensive stroller and Pedro holding Carlos's hand, pausing to

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<sup>2</sup> 'Cuba is, of course, *mea maxima culpa*... guilt is not a feeling foreign to exile' (Cabrera Infante 1994, 4).

greet friends, to buy *un helado de mamey*, to watch the sun set on their city. She should be ignoring the admiring glances of men, safe in her world, the world she had worked so hard to etch out (1996, 261).

Another way that the past on the island is idealised by the Miami refugees is illustrated by Daniel, who, also affected by seeing Consuelo in the distance, begins to participate in counter-revolutionary activities:

Daniel, for his part, began to find himself once again in the company of the plotters and schemers and the *desesperados* – the hotheads who longed to splatter their blood in the dirt of *la patria*. In his mind, in his torment, Daniel's desire to regain his past with Consuelo merged with a passion to regain Cuba.

In this he was not alone. The Cuban refugees found life in Miami a caricature of what they felt life should be. Their pining for home was so intense, so purely an expression of life lost, that it infected everything they did. When Consuelo and Pedro took the children to Miami Beach for the first time, all they could talk about was the beaches of Varadero. Their superlatives were so exaggerated, their nostalgia so acute, that always afterwards Ana Maria would imagine a place where caster sugar ran to greet the sea. (1996, 276)

The desperation of these 'plotters and schemers' is more than just political fervour. It is also a desperate need to feel *macho* again, that sense of – to put it in its vulgar but culturally recognisable form – having the biggest *cojones* [testicles], which is a thread in the cultural legacy of the Cuban male. That is not to devalue patriotism or to be overly cynical about the cultural associations that lead to a fervour to fight for a lost homeland. I am rather suggesting that a sense of inadequacy, even of shame, about being a migrant in a new land can be one of the many factors compelling the migrant to look back towards home.

Pamela Smorkaloff explores this prevalent theme of nostalgia in Cuban-American and other Latino writing. She notes that when the Dominican-American Julia Álvarez was 'asked why her novel *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* moves backwards in time, Alvarez responds succinctly: "Because this is how memory functions." This inverse movement, she adds, "is peculiar to those who abandon their country. You run a risk: that of falling into the constant nostalgia of idealising the past. Like constructing a Garden of Eden in the territory of Memory. In my case that would be to imagine an idyllic childhood on that island when in truth there was an abominable dictatorship, with disappeared and terror" (Smorkaloff 1999, 8). While this is patently true, it does not answer the question of why the migrant has such a strong need to deny the past. What does such a denial offer the self, caught in the exigencies of a new land? I would argue that the landscapes of the past are idealised through nostalgia as a means of shoring up a

floundering self, a self besieged by the demands of the new land. Narcissism leads to a defence of the shamed self so that the past reality – even as brutal a reality as an abominable dictatorship – is made over. The lost land is idealised in the mirror reflection of the lost self. The lost land was honey and roses, and the old self dwelt in this paradise of perfection as the first man and woman did in Eden, before the shame of the fall.

Smorkaloff writes that the ‘hyphen of her writer’s existence’ is described by Alvarez as ‘a space of conflict, rather than complacency or nostalgia. The hyphen sparked her writer’s imagination precisely because it is “the place where two worlds collide”’ (1999, 8). An existentialist feeling that life in exile has forced the exile into an untenable compromise, and that the self-chosen exile has failed in his duty to fight for the liberation of ‘*la patria*’, the place where life – where everything – was infinitely better than it is in the United States – is part of the encoded and unacknowledged shame of ‘Consejo al Niño Cubano’ [see appendix], a poem I will look at in detail below. In ‘Consejo’, the narrator urges the second generation to sacrifice everything for the liberation of the homeland, to take up arms, to acknowledge the bitterness of exile – all things that the previous, unhyphenated generation has for the most part failed to do, despite having had a much bigger investment in this stance by virtue of the greater material and psychic loss, of the relatively greater unfamiliarity with American customs and the English language, and of the close familial ties ruptured by the move. Yet it is precisely the shame of this failure that lends the emotional stridency to ‘Consejo.’

As well as the feelings of shame, mostly buried and hidden from the self, which emerge from the sense of paradise lost when speaking of the Cuban exile experience, there was the need to cope with another shame: that of being a member of a despised minority, threatening the homogenous Anglo culture supposedly previously enjoyed by ‘native’ (read Anglos – the indigenous people of Florida like those of other colonised lands were marginalised to the point of being all but invisible) Miamians before the waves of the Cuban onslaught. Prejudice against one as an ethnic minority is in some ways easier to defend against than the inner, more private shame of not having fought for ‘*la patria*’ [the fatherland]. The shame of being a member of a despised minority is also a theme in *The Rooms in My Mother’s House*:

The Caldwells who lived at the corner and who all had round sheared heads and were slow at school called out Cuban spics! whenever any of the Santiagos passed by. Pedro would have liked to get out



of his car and slap their faces for them and kick them in their *culos* until they rolled on the ground but he didn't dare and he couldn't speak to their parents either because he was ashamed of his English. (1996, 312)

At school the teachers were middle-aged and matronly and worried about what the Cubans and the blacks were doing to their town. They were scared of the blacks and couldn't believe their impudence but the Cubans were sometimes worse, with their rude chatter that you couldn't understand in your own country and their loud clothes and louder radios. They were not pleased to see Carlos and Ana in their classrooms, even such well-behaved and bright children as Carlos and Ana did nothing to please them. If anything, the fact that the two did not conform to their prejudices was even harder to handle, was quite disconcerting. When the boys scuffled in line and reached over to torment Carlos it was Carlos who was sent outside to run laps... The teacher forgot to end the punishment, and Carlos's migraine lasted for days. (1996, 313)

Ana, like her father, is ashamed of her English:

Whenever Ana's turn came to read aloud to the class, there was always some word like yellow which Ana would mispronounce as jello. It never failed to send the class into fits. (1996, 313)

For a long time Ana does not understand that the hostility directed against her and her family is nothing more than discrimination because of her ethnicity.

It was not until much later that she understood neither she, nor any of her family, were any longer welcome at the school or in the neighbourhood or even in the old house on 25<sup>th</sup> Street. (1996, 313-14)

Andrea, the protagonist in my latest novel (working title *All of a Piece*), experiences many forms of shame, all exacerbated by the losses of migration. The origins of shame in the family can be traced from the protagonist's mother's background and her grandmother's sexual promiscuity and from the protagonist's father's childhood experiences of abandonment, and the concurrent shame that this engenders. The mother's sexual repression, a by-product of shaming, contributes to her problems with breast-feeding, and the family uses shame as a device to control and diminish others. Among other topics surrounding shame are the transgression of boundaries, shame in relation to wildness, the natural or animal nature, the unwanted infant, bodily functions, cleanliness, the inside/outside dichotomy, horror over homo-erotic contact, abjection, the passing down of shame from one generation to another, abandonment, group normativity, shame and sexual fantasies, avoidance, and dealing with shame by seeking to shame others. It seems like an awful lot when I list it that way, but as Pattison (2000) writes, shame-bound families have a multitude of ways to shame others, and most of them happen around us without our scarcely realising. Many novels deal primarily with shame; some of the more obvious ones are Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. Obviously, the main character in the novel, Andrea, has a problematical sense of self, dependent on external validation from significant others, or

what I and others (Bowen 1978; Schnarch 1991; Schnarch 1997) have called a reflected or mirrored self. Andrea has interiorised her parents' shaming, but the novel charts the first step towards self-healing—the beginning of her journey towards greater self-awareness, understanding and a more 'whole' self.

### **Shaming used to discourage assimilation ('la cubana arrepentida')**

I don't remember exactly how I came across the poem by the Cuban journalist and poet Ernesto Montaner, who went into exile in Miami after the Cuban revolution. I have a dim memory of my father handing me his daily newspaper, *El Diario de Las Américas*, and me being so struck by these verses that they formed the forward to the scrapbook of my life that I made during the long summer days at the end of the sixth grade. Montaner's plea to the Cuban child to not change his broad Cuban accent, to never prefer 'yes' to 'sí,' and to bear in mind that the homeland awaits him, is the sort of literature that Paul Allatson and Jo McCormack (2004) describe as written for the sake of the exiled generation much more than for their offspring. It is the older generation's fond, wistful hope that the future generation maintain these mythologies, but couched in the exhortation itself is the acknowledgement that this probably won't be the case. These values – of irrevocable patriotism, of duty to the homeland, of nostalgia for the past – are daily being eroded and already disappearing, and as such the poem is indulgently sentimental rather than able to express a 'real' sentiment.

The poem exhorts the second generation child to resist assimilation by essentially rejecting the host American state, variously described as a warm coat generously offered (reducing the most powerful nation on earth to the status of a garment), a friend, a sister nation, a lent or borrowed country, a place where it is preferable to shed one's blood than put down roots, and finally, the best place to live ('*pueblo mejor no existe*') but still insufficient to keep a Cuban from his own homeland. The host nation is variously disparaged, compared unfavourably, found lacking, or else its supposed superior virtues are acknowledged and simultaneously dismissed as of no consequence. In all of this, the poem recalls the most shameful thing a Cuban could say to another Cuban in my school days – to call him or her *cubana(o) arrepentida(o)*. The word *arrepentida*, according to my Collins Spanish-English dictionary, suggests something slightly different from ashamed; rather it denotes 'regretful, repentant, sorry.' But it was used daily to shame

anyone who was perceived as in any way critical or less than proud of their Cuban background. To speak negatively of any aspect of Cuban culture, to laugh at the doings of *santeros* or the dead chickens and other sacrificed animals clogging the Okeechobee and Miami rivers because of *santería* (the blend of religions that combines the worship of traditional African Yoruban deities with the worship of Roman Catholic saints), or to sneer at the sometimes giant statues of saints set out in shrines in the front yards of Hialeah, to hang out with the Anglos or wear Levis rather than high-waisted polyester pants and gold jewellery, was to invite a cold appraisal and the scathing judgement of '*cubana arrepentida*'. At the time I gave little thought to what I was accused of repenting, but now it occurs to me that to be repentant suggests that a crime was committed in the first place – the crime, it would seem, of having been born Cuban, a sentiment also featured in a popular song refrain by Albita Rodríguez, '¿Qué culpa tengo yo de haber nacido en Cuba?' – what fault is it of mine that I was born Cuban? (1995). But I daresay that as far as the coinage of the phrase, the use of 'repentant' is tongue-in-cheek, part of the black humour of Cubans, meant to be taken ironically rather than to denote any real sense of shame over being born Cuban.

Still, the compulsion to shame and disparage the Cuban who might seem to be moving towards assimilation is integral to the putdown of '*cubana arrepentida*,' and part of what is being dealt out in Montaner's poem. The child is reminded that a Cuban without a flag is unworthy of Martí – the Cuban statesman and poet who led the struggle for independence from the Spanish, often from exile in America. The child is also exhorted to be worthy of Maceo, another leader of the independence. He or she is instructed to say that '*así es el cubano*' – this is how Cubans are and there is therefore no other option than to take up arms and fight the tyrant; to do anything less would be to lose one's 'Cubanness', to have it summarily stripped from one like a soldier's insignia after a court martial.

As a child I experienced a burst of patriotism when encountering this poem, an emotion heightened by the rare experience of feeling that I belonged to something important and even precious – which I certainly didn't experience in relation to the Anglo community, from which I felt excluded and rejected more often than not. In my excitement, I did not stop to wonder if the '*niño cubano*' being addressed was not the masculine-feminine amalgam of all children, but actually the male child who is also '*niño*.' I could not have

then seen that, among so much else ‘wrong’ with these lines, is also an implicit machismo (or rather *masculinismo*, without the overt bragging): an over-valuing of the masculine at the expense of the feminine; what is needed is fighters and soldiers, and when this was penned and published sometime in the early seventies, that was a gun-toting male.

So much is at stake for the Cuban child here: he must not ever accept ‘*otras formas de regreso*’ – other ways back to the island. ‘*Las glorias de un pueblo preso han de ser reconquistadas*’ – the country is imprisoned, so its glories must be reconquered. Nothing less is acceptable. To live in a borrowed homeland is to live in agony – the Mambises, the army of Cuban national insurrection against Spain – taught Cubans to fight this way (here Montaner is also alluding to the line in the Cuban national anthem: ‘to live in chains is to live immersed in opprobrium’). Montaner’s words, roughly translated as ‘to the Yankee who would pretend to make a Yankee of you’ have particularly disparaging overtones, referring to the pretence, the naïve hope, of the Yank. As well, of course, the word Yankee is never used with entirely serious or flattering intent. The child is further told, in second person narration, that he must prefer to die with a gun in hand... because that is better than to stop being Cuban, a sentiment that leaves very little alternatives or room to manoeuvre. The exhortations continue, cascading rhythmically: tell him affectionately that this is how a child feels who belongs to that ‘*patria mambisa*’. In fact, one should be in a hurry to give one’s blood in *torrents*. The Cuban child is told that he cannot know how to live without a star on his forehead, a reference to the lone star of the Cuban flag.

In the last four stanzas the sentiment escalates a fraction closer to sheer hysteria as the verses reach for the exalted: the Cuban landscape is so beautiful that the sky changes its suit in order to better reflect himself in her. Her star comes from the arcane mysteries that God himself tore with his hands for her patrimony and is the greatest pride of Cuba and Cubans. And then, in the penultimate stanza, being Cuban is likened to being Christ – if you were born in this (North American) soil, say that Christ was born in Bethlehem but continued to belong to Heaven. Such are the heights for which the Cuban child must strive – either a Christ-like glory or a fall from grace so complete that he should no longer even consider himself Cuban. There is nothing in between the two extremes of exaltation/death for the motherland and apathy/shame/ceasing to be Cuban.

### Language, acculturation and shame

Interestingly as far as the theme of shame, Pérez Firmat traces a song played in Miami as late as 1974 that made a connection between bilingualism and homosexuality. The song's protagonist is Abelardo, or 'Abe' for short (*pájaro* or *ave* is Cuban slang for homosexual), who avers with a lisp:

*No ha sido la culpa mía  
Haber nacido varón  
Pero de que yo sea bilingüe  
De eso no hay discusión.*  
(Pérez Firmat 1994, 106).

I can't be blamed  
for being born male  
but that I am bilingual  
there is no doubt.

Here heterosexuality is equated with speaking one language, and the obverse is implicated in culpability. As Pérez Firmat points out, 'by using bilingualism as a metaphor for homosexuality, the song identifies acculturation with effeminacy. Notice that the target of derision is not someone who has forgotten Spanish but someone who has also learned English' (1994, 107). Pérez Firmat adds that speaking English, by implication, makes Abe a renegade Cuban, a '*cubano arrepentido*' (1994, 107). The disclaimer of culpability is a repetition of the theme in the Albita song mentioned above that proclaims, 'what fault is it of mine that I was born Cuban?' These protestations point to either bypassed, unacknowledged shame, or to a defence against shaming by others, or possibly both.

Pérez Firmat writes: 'Miami Spanish includes a term that, so far as I know, is unique to the city of sun and solecisms: *nilingüe*. Just as *bilingüe* is someone who speaks two languages... a *nilingüe* is someone who doesn't speak either: *ni español, ni inglés*' (1994, 46). He gives as an example the actor Ricky Ricardo, whose Spanish deteriorated as he aged. His occasional on-screen Spanish was corrupted with Anglicisms: 'falta' for *culpa*, 'introducir' for *presentar*. But his English didn't improve with time either. In exploring the use of word *nilingüe* in Miami's streets and the claim that some Cuban Americans have no language, Pérez Firmat falls into the incorrect assumption that two languages, spoken poorly, is tantamount to having no language. What is interesting nevertheless is the phenomenon of the erosion of the language of origin while the speaker struggles to acquire proficiency in the new tongue. Clearly what Pérez Firmat is witnessing in the street when the word *nilingüe* is heard is a sense of shame transmitted through

exaggerating the loss of language.

I knew someone in the unfortunate position of losing Spanish without fully acquiring English when I was an undergraduate at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri. A worker in the dormitory mailroom, Rosa had been born in Cuba but immigrated to the States when she was 16. If she had gone to Miami, her Spanish might have remained intact, but in St Louis Rosa had little opportunity to practice it. On the other hand, at 16 it was much harder to acquire a new language than it might have been had she been a young child. Rosa was left in that shameful no man's land, without great fluency in either tongue. It was a striking loss. My father, despite his 40 years in Miami, never acquired English. This failure made me acutely uncomfortable in my youth, and still astonishes me. What I felt in his presence when he commanded me to translate for him, (Olga María, *dile...*) was nothing short of shame.

### **Shameful fictions**

There are many ways a minority culture can try to defend itself against the onslaught of the majority. Some of these involve attempts at censorship of free artistic expression, particularly of the written word, but also of critical art such as cartoons and caricatures that may lampoon or satirise cultural icons. This is especially the case when a culture does not have a long tradition of encouraging free expression of emotions. *A Road Well Travelled* (Doran et al. 1988) is a collection of interviews with Cuban-American women. One of the things the researchers report was the difficulty they had getting older Cuban women to express their feelings. One woman said, 'In Cuba, you don't ask yourself all kinds of questions like, who am I? What do I want with my life, and why? Here (in the United States) it is natural to have a psychoanalyst, or a clergyman, or somebody you can trust, and you know, go and empty your garbage' (Doran et al. 1988, vi). It is significant that she describes expressing feelings as emptying garbage – feelings are obviously something associated with the shameful, contaminated and abject.

Smorkaloff writes that Edmundo Desnoes, in his 1981 anthology *Los dispositivos en la flor: Cuba, literatura desde la revolución*, declared in his prologue: '*no es prólogo para cubanos* (this is not a prologue for Cubans)' (1999, ix). This, Smorkaloff tells us, breaks 'with the old notion that a collection of Cuban narratives published in the United States

would, whether welcomed or denounced, necessarily circulate primarily among Cuban-Americans' (1999, ix). In fact, for a long time anything vaguely critical of Cubans written by Cubans was soundly denounced and '*cubano arrepentido*' was again trotted out. But it is true that Cuban-Americans no longer write just for other Cuban-Americans; the novels of Cristina Garcia have been widely translated and even with my own *The Rooms in My Mother's House* (1996), my main source of royalties is currently Greece. Still, when I tried to find a publisher or agent in the United States, the reply I heard most often was that while the book was very good, they could not see how to market a Cuban-American who lived in Australia: a Cuban-American-Australian had no place in the scheme of things. I am thus a double hyphen, or even a *cubana-americana-australiana arrepentida*. Smorkaloff refers to those Cuban-Americans who depart Miami for Paris or New York 'to continue the dream of "otherness"' (1999, 23). I have long thought that Paris, where Zoe Valdés has lived, Spain (as the mother country), or at a stretch London where Guillermo Cabrera Infante resided, were the only possibilities if one wanted to get published as a Cuban exile outside Miami. Cuba looked towards Europe as the new world looked to the old, but Melbourne has no co-ordinates on this cultural map, does not even exist except as the place where one falls off the edge of the world. My parents have confided to me their shame that their daughter would choose to live 'so far away.'

Despite elements of the community that might work against free expression, there are also strong traditions of unfettered creative expression in Cuban literature and these have been manifest in the work of Cuban-Americans and other Cuban expatriates. Zoe Valdés's *Te di la vida entera* (published in Australia as *I Gave You All I Had*, 1996) pushes the boundaries of conventional literature in terms of form, style, voice, point of view, and, most of all, in the way gritty hyper-realism slides into magic realism and surrealism seemingly at a whim. It captures the Cuban vernacular, with its colourful word play, witticisms and vulgarities as well as colonial corruptions and miss-sayings. Juxtaposing floridly formal language with the absurdly vulgar and a black, camp, humour, it has the earthiness of the grunge novel but is anchored in social satire.

The story revolves around Cuca, a country girl abandoned by her parents and raised by her godmother, whose son attempts to rape her. The godmother arrives just in time and opens his back with a nail at the end of a board. But she doesn't save Cuca's brother, simply referred to always as the 'asthmatic religious fanatic.' The godmother's son rapes

him in a scene of blood and excrement witnessed by Cuca, who is dismayed by the look of pleasure in her brother's face. There are, as well, instances of almost pornographic perversity. Cuca goes to Havana. She hears a romantic song on the radio; her vagina is immediately moist – she is having a 'spiritual reaction'. She meets the undeserving object of her life-long passion and the hole, as yet unexplored, of her vagina does not stop beating since the moment when his halitosis-ridden mouth explores hers. His stench is caused by onions, dental caries and throat plaque. Henceforth the damsel recognises her love by his mouth odor. There is very little poetry in this novel; at one point I noted '*voz de brisa de cañaveral*' – a character's voice is likened to the breeze through cane fields, a relief from the relentless, if colourful, vulgarities.

When the revolution renders Cuca's life the most bitterly ridiculous, Valdés abandons any claim to realism. The cynicism is rife; one line struck me in particular: 'We Cubans are like that – given the choice between going to see a relative at a funeral or a show at the Tropicana, 99 percent of us choose the second' (1996, 82). The insouciance in this contrasts sharply with Montaner's feverish exhortations '*Dile que Cuba es así, Dile que así es el cubano...*' another version of 'we Cubans are like that.' Valdés's endless farce is practically shameless, a revelling in triviality and decadence, particularly during the Batista years of the novel leading up the revolution. Even after the revolution there is more of the same – the narrator Cuca refers to 'this shit story of this shit-eating country.' Point of view slips in and out of first and third person narrative, even sometimes twines around in the space of a single page. Eventually a plethora of narrators emerge – not only different characters but also the unseen narrator's conscience and another unknown narrator's voice and in the final pages, the author herself, confronting the reader from a park in Madrid where she is playing with her daughter (the only point where the book abandons its satirical, sarcastic edge). In the end, the novel finds its moral centre in a scathing indictment of the Castro regime, but it never ceases to be shameless in its embrace of the scatological and even the pornographic. It projects a sense of the author herself as posturing shamelessly – a child who manifests as agitated, brazen and somewhat out-of-control. It is literature at its most provocative, and it offers no peace of mind.

Valdés has a literary precedent in Reinaldo Arenas. His *Before Night Falls* (1993) is, among other things, a scandalous experience. Arenas was ostracised and marginalised in



Castro's Cuba for his homosexuality and fought to express himself as a writer, paying a high price in Cuba's prisons. One of the things that comes across most poignantly in this autobiographical work is his fight to just have a room of his own, anywhere, a place to write, to enjoy sex, and just to be. Despite the difficulties, Arenas continued to write subversive, satirical and one could even say shameless literature. Much of what passes for personal anecdote in his autobiography is scarcely believable and reads much like Valdés's satire. For instance, writing about growing up in the country, on the pages where he is six and has just started school, Arenas writes: 'My sexual activity was all with animals. First there were the hens, then the goats and the sows, and after I had grown up some more, the mares. To fuck a mare was generally a collective operation. All of us boys would get up on a rock to be at the right height for the animal, and we would savor that pleasure: it was a warm hole and, to us, without end' (1993, 10-11).

There is, then, a sense of claiming the right to write the unspeakable throughout much of Arenas's work. It is as if, having lived outside the norms of so-called respectable society because of his homosexuality, he is free to move beyond other boundaries of 'propriety'. In this sense there is a shamelessness in his work that corresponds to an embracing of the abject in Kristeva's (1982) sense of 'internalised pollution', which sees defilement and dirt as moving from the external into the internal sphere, thus becoming incorporated within the notion of the self, an idea that has very close ties with the sense of shame as accruing to the self in opposition to guilt which is more associated with an act (Lewis 1971; Pattison 2000). Arenas's writing evokes ceremonies of defilement that not only breach boundaries but also describe and reinscribe a regression to an anarchic level.

Another Cuban-American writer, Achy Obejas, explores shame extensively in her *Memory Mambo* (1996). Among the sources of shame are the different expectations between the parents who consider themselves unwilling exiles and their children, the one-and-a-halfers, and the shame of not sufficiently knowing the Cuban homeland. In this case the family is in Chicago, part of a small Cuban enclave, but the cultural tensions are very similar to what one would find in Miami.

One of Obejas's short stories, reproduced in *Cubana* (1998, 179), takes its name from the following observations by the nameless narrator: 'We left Cuba so you could dress like this? my father will ask over my mother's shoulder ... And for the first and only time in

my life, I'll say, Look, you didn't come for me, you came for you; you came because all your rich clients were leaving, and you were going to wind up a cashier in your father's hardware store' (1998, 187). Here one finds an example of shaming and counter-shaming. The parents attempt to shame through the suggestion that sacrifice was made in leaving the island, sacrifices that have not paid off as the child has failed to grasp the opportunity to properly prosper, to take advantages of the capitalist possibilities offered by North America and to dress appropriately. The child responds with counter shaming: no sacrifice was made for *me*; you left for your own selfish self-interests. It is said for the 'first and only time' as such impudence, in my experience, is not readily tolerated in Cuban-American households.

Smorkaloff argues that *Memory Mambo* 'explodes false memory, nostalgia and the mythology of exile,' achieving a 'definite break with narratives of nostalgia and evocation' (1999, 32). What is sought instead is a series of individual truths, faced fearlessly, in order to do away with the 'lies that separate, divide, and ultimately conquer the characters' (1999, 39). In this sense we have a clearing away of hidden shame, because shame does not exist where there is openness and acceptance and tolerance. False memory, in the form of nostalgia that has no place in reality, and that attempts to privilege the past and deride, devalue or arouse shame about the present, is explored, exploded and rejected.

However Paul Allatson problematizes Smorkaloff's analysis of identity in *Memory Mambo*. In his discussion of the many dislocated versions of self caught in gender, cultural and political cross-currents in *Memory Mambo*, Allatson writes that:

The unstable figurations of the lesbian in this family-centric environment must always be related back to the complicated web of transcultural processes encoded in the hyphenated conjunction of Cuban and American. So far, those implications have been only hinted at; and they are introduced now in cognisance of the hyphen's inadequacy, its implication of separating, yet uniting, assumed equivalences of power and meaning. In any guise, the lesbian in *Memory Mambo* is like the novel's other diasporic subjects, whatever the scripts of gender or sexuality allocated them in the narrative. Her body, like theirs, is never beyond, never unaffected by, the rival culturally and linguistically contingent bodily economies that meet in Juani's families and communities. (2002, 172)

Allatson questions Smorkaloff's claim that 'Juani's is a journey into historical truth' (1997/98, 6), asserting that 'whether conceived as monolithic and graspable, or as plural, irresolvably complicated, and resonant beyond Cuban-U.S. antagonisms, historical truth is one of the novel's casualties' (2002, 163). Allatson goes on to demonstrate how the

novel is replete with characters who cannot be 'unequivocally located in one or another kinship group' (2002, 165), who resist categorising by problematic gender classifications and/or national and cultural affiliations, and who above all, to varying degrees, embody an 'identificatory slipperiness' (2002, 166). Allatson in particular examines these problematical identities as written through the lesbian narrator's (Juani's) struggles with the character of Jimmy. For my purposes of exploring how shame is implicated in problematical identity issues, Jimmy's reaction to Juani's open lesbianism, one of affront, confusion and aggression, works as a shaming mechanism which complicates his own precarious albeit machismo gender identity.

Very early in *Memory Mambo* the ambivalent nature of the narrator's relationship with Cuba is alluded to in language that is scatological and thus touches on the abject-shameful. 'I just sit at the kitchen table, playing with the edge of the plastic placemat, which says *Cuba* and has a map of the island, a picture of the flag, and a bouquet of palm trees. On the placemat Cuba looks like a giant brown turd' (1996, 15). Similarly, as Smorkaloff observes, in Hijuelos's *Our House in the Last World* (1993), Cuba is depicted as a source of contagion, with the word *microbio* appearing repeatedly, 'suggesting that Cuba is also an illness, physical and mental' (1999, 46). In both cases, a sense of being Cuban as a shameful condition is being suggested. Another comment, this about Jimmy, the shameless 'macho' in the novel, also points to a sense of Cuban identity as shameful: 'there is something disgustingly Cuban about him' (Obejas 1996, 60).

Shame over racial background has been carried out of Cuba by the narrator's mother in Obejas's *Memory Mambo*: 'But what really kills them is when Patricia tells them that, if indeed we're descendants of Las Casas, chances are we're the spawns of an illegitimate child conceived with some Indian woman he probably raped. My mother practically faints over this – not because it so tampers with the historical image of our supposed ancestor but because it would mean that, in spite of our mother's best efforts, we're not so white after all' (1996, 34). This mother left after the revolution, her daughter claims, not because of Castro's communism but because he inverted the racial order that had oppressed her but that she had endorsed, just as the slave legitimises its master because of introjected shame: 'When the revolution triumphed in 1959, nothing stunned my mother more than the fact that that crazy Raul and his black friends were riding on tanks with Fidel through the city... In that instant, my mother – who'd been struggling to pass her

entire life – could see that the order of things had just been altered’ (1996, 35). Similarly, when a Puerto Rican musician is asked to play at her daughter’s wedding, the mother is scandalised: ‘Now every picture is going to have a Negro in it,’ she said, rolling her eyes, as if Mario were actually black instead of mulatto, or the only black person invited – and as if any of that mattered to anybody but her’ (1996, 69).

The narrator is also sharply aware of the different cultural values and cross-currents that hold her in an uncomfortable place. Her cousin Pauli’s father is a drunkard, but this fact allows differing reactions in the two cultures: ‘In American terms, Pauli refused to enable her father. In Cuban terms, she was an ingrate’ (1996, 63). By American standards, she has a responsibility to not be a co-dependent, thus to ‘enable’ his alcoholism entails a shameful dereliction of her responsibilities to her self and to her father. Such an attitude however is inconceivable in Cuban terms: her moral responsibility here is non-judgemental filial loyalty. The two cultures could not be further apart, and the judgemental, shame-laden word ‘ingrate’ is the bullet in the cross-fire.

Pauli is enough of a rebel to add shame to this shame-ridden extended family. ‘These were minor skirmishes – charges of loitering, disturbing the peace, nothing serious like drugs or assault – but the family as a whole felt great worry and shame’ (1996, 66). But one of the largest sources of stress and shame for the family is the narrator’s lesbianism:

My father’s worst fear, I think, is that I’ll say something to him about it. Because he can think of nothing worse than having to look me in the eye and make a decision about whether to accept or reject me, my father creates an illusion of normalcy about the emptiness of our interactions... Because he’s afraid I won’t lie, it’s vital to him that I not be provoked into the truth. In my family, this is always the most important thing. (1996, 80)

Smorkaloff observes that in Obejas’s story ‘We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?’:

the young narrator and her parents have... radically different responses to the existential question of who they are, where they came from and where they are going ... The father’s immobility, his spiritual and historical stasis, causes him to paralyze temporarily the daughter, literally knocking her down with kicks and blows, since he cannot otherwise prevent her from growing away from him and into the world around her. (1999, 5)

This scenario is well known to me and is one I wrote about in *The Rooms*: the father faces the new world with shame about his own inadequacies. Unable or unwilling to meet its demands, he humiliates his offspring through physical and verbal abuse, in an effort to

also keep them down, in order to avoid facing the shame of their superior ability to move out into the world.

Respect is thus a constant motif in much of the writing about the cross-over generations. Smorkaloff writes about Pablo Armando Fernández's novel *Los niños se despiden* (1968) and quotes: 'What had to be loved and respected, to say it in family terms, was geography. We had a very poor concept of history; we were ahistorical. The important thing was being Cuban, feeling Cuban, and that could only be determined by our geography, its climate and nature. We were Cuban because we had been born here and not somewhere else...' (cited in Smorkaloff 1999, 193). I find this very poignant, and mystifyingly so. There is an emotional anti-intellectualism about it that seems to capture something of my own experience of being Cuban-American: an appeal to a base fact (you were born in Cuba) that privileges it over all other possible knowledge including knowledge of historical verities. Respect is demanded and must be unquestioning: this is what it means to be Cuban. But the new generation, the hyphenated writers, are finding ways to both understand the exigencies of their father's and mother's lives, with compassion as well as clear sightedness. They are moving beyond the demands for respect and nostalgia towards an appreciation of history, reality, and truth. In these slippery slopes, they are finding places to write.

The poignancy in much of this inter-generational writing formed in exile lies in precisely the to-ing and fro-ing – one can never fully detach from the parent generation and their failure and supposed, assumed, shame, nor shake off the irrational shame placed on the one-and-a-halfers for failing to do what our parents also didn't do. Yet we remain bound together, passing shame back and forth. Because, like it or not, as Ray Gaita observed (1997), we are also shamed by the actions of others who are close to us; this is a part of the human condition. None of us can fully stand outside wrong-doing or even wrongful thinking, we are always somehow complicit, whenever and wherever we touch it. No wonder we avoid shame more than we do guilt, that even Freud avoided it; no wonder the self goes to so much trouble to armour against it. It is elastic, sticky, evasive, endlessly rebounding, pervasive, and ultimately, if sufficiently chronic and pernicious, soul(self)-destroying. It seems the only way to deal with it is to look it squarely in the eye, expose it to the light of day, and force it to shrivel in the glare of, for example, literary acceptance.

**Appendix 1****Consejo al Niño Cubano**

Por Ernesto Montaner

Ven acá, niño cubano  
Que estás hablando en inglés:  
Nunca prefieras el 'yes'  
Al 'sí' de tu castellano.

No cambies tu acento llano  
Que te viene del mambí,  
Y nunca arranques de tí  
A esa Patria que te espera,  
Que un cubano sin bandera  
Es indigno de Martí.

A esta nación generosa  
Que te ha brindado su abrigo,  
Dale tu mano de amigo  
Con gratitud respetuosa.

Mas, al verla tan grandiosa  
No turbes tu mente sana,  
Dile a la nación hermana  
Que se grabe en la memoria  
Que no cambias ni la gloria  
Por tu bandera cubana.

Hazle saber que arde en tí  
El fervoroso deseo  
De ser digno de Maceo  
Y ser digno de Martí.

Dile que Cuba es así.  
Dile que así es el cubano  
Y que no juras en vano  
Si juras que has de volver  
Para morir o vencer  
Con el fusil en la mano.

Que no aceptas, tramitadas,  
Otras formas de regreso:  
Las glorias de un pueblo preso  
Han de ser reconquistadas.

Dile que en patrias prestadas  
Vivir, es agonizar  
Y que tu sangre has de dar  
Si hay que sembrar las raíces.  
Dile que así los mambises  
Te enseñaron a pelear.

**Advice to a Cuban Child**

by Ernesto Montaner (my translation)

Come here, Cuban child  
now speaking in English  
Never choose 'yes' over  
The 'si' of your Castillian Spanish.

Don't change your broad accent  
Which comes to you from the Mambi  
And never uproot from within you  
That homeland that awaits you  
For a Cuban without a flag  
Is unworthy of Martí.

To this generous nation  
Who has offered you a jacket  
Give it a friendly handshake  
With respectful gratitude.

And, when seeing her grandeur,  
Don't trouble your healthy mind  
Tell the sister nation  
To engrave in her memory  
That you won't even exchange heaven  
For your Cuban flag.

Make her know that burns in you  
The fervent desire  
To be worthy of Maceo  
And be worthy of Martí.

Say that Cuba is like that.  
Say that a Cuban is like that  
That you don't swear in vain  
If you swear that you will return  
To die or vanquish  
With a gun in your hand.

That you will not accept  
Other forms of return  
The glories of an imprisoned people  
Demand to be reconquered.

Say that in borrowed motherlands  
To live is to agonise  
And that your blood you must give  
Rather than put down roots  
Say that this is how the Mambises<sup>3</sup>  
Taught you how to fight.

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<sup>3</sup> The revolutionary army that fought for independence from the Spanish.

Al yanqui que pretendiera  
 Hacer un yanqui de tí  
 Dile que cerca de aquí  
 Hay una Patria que espera.

Que no cambias tu bandera  
 Y que irás contra el tirano  
 Con el fusil en la mano  
 A morir si esa es tu suerte,  
 Porque prefieres la muerte  
 A dejar de ser cubano.

Dale tu mejor sonrisa,  
 Pero dile con cariño  
 Cuál es el sentir de un niño  
 De aquella Patria mambisa.

Ve y dile que tienes prisa  
 Por dar tu sangre en torrente  
 Por la Cuba independiente,

Y que prefieres morir  
 Porque no sabes vivir  
 Sin una estrella en la frente.

Dile que Cuba es tan bella  
 Y es tan bello su paisaje  
 Que el cielo cambia de traje  
 Para reflejarse en ella.

Dile que tiene una estrella  
 De los misterios arcanos  
 Que arrancó Dios con sus manos  
 Para patrimonio tuyo  
 Y que es el mejor orgullo  
 De Cuba y de los cubanos.  
 Si naciste en este suelo  
 Dile por Cuba también  
 Que Cristo nació en Belén  
 Y siguió siendo del cielo.

Dile – y dilo sin recelo –  
 Que a este pueblo lo amarás  
 ¡Ay! tanto como el que más,  
 Que pueblo mejor no existe,  
 Pero cubano naciste  
 Y cubano morirás.

To the Yank who would pretend  
 to make a Yank of you  
 tell him that near here  
 There is a homeland that waits.

That you won't change your flag  
 and that you'll go against the tyrant  
 with a rifle in hand  
 to die if that is your fortune  
 because you would prefer to die  
 rather than cease being Cuban.

Give him your best smile  
 but say with fondness  
 what is the feeling of a child  
 of that mambisa country.

Go tell him that you are in a hurry  
 to give your blood in torrents  
 for an independent Cuba,

and that you would prefer to die  
 because you don't know how to live  
 Without a star on your forehead.

Say that Cuba is so beautiful  
 and so beautiful her landscape  
 that the sky changes its suit  
 To reflect himself in her.

Tell him that she has a star  
 From the arcane mysteries  
 That God tore off with his hands  
 For patrimony with you  
 and it is the pride  
 Of Cuba and of the Cubans  
 If you were born in this land  
 Say for Cuba as well  
 That Christ was born in Bethlehem  
 But still belonged to Heaven.

Tell him – and say it without rancour  
 that you will love this country  
 As much as he loves it most  
 that a better country doesn't exist  
 But you were born Cuban  
 And Cuban you will die.

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