



Vol. 8, No. 2, Winter 2011, 245-266
www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Debate

Literature, History, and the Lost Republic **Rafael Rojas's *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History***

Román de la Campa

University of Pennsylvania

To say that Cuban history presents unusual challenges may be an understatement. A sequence of colonial, republican, socialist and post-socialist regimes awaits unifying narratives, a succession of radical changes that could threaten the survival of any nation, perhaps even more so in the case of a Caribbean island. The degree of difficulty only deepens when one takes on board the symbolic role seized by the Cuban Revolution during the Cold War, an event that turned that nation's history into a story involving all of the Americas, if not the world, a proximity to the here and now that only heightens the need for nuance and rigor. Multiple and contentious views abound for readers and writers, not only in the scholarly realm, but also in the arena occupied by living witnesses who claim their own form of authority. Few thinkers really attempt this task in a comprehensive way.

Academic writing, as we know, must divide its object of study in the pursuit of precision, carefully guarding its disciplinary grounds from risky

generalizations, all the more so when approaching a history of the present. Film, novels and other discursive arts, perhaps more daring, must also model the presentation of lived experience according to certain patterns or precepts. A skillful writer able to periodize creatively may be what is needed for the task here described, an accomplished essayist able to navigate the stormy waters of intellectual history. If so, one should welcome the publication of *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*, Rafael Rojas's first book in English.¹ It seems fair to say that he attempts to face this challenge head on and that his way of doing so deserves recognition, as well as a much closer critical engagement than it has received thus far. Indeed, a look at his production over the past decade will discover that Rojas is not only committed to writing Cuban history, but rather that he has turned this project into a mission, for he writes as if the nation's future depended on the Republic he aims to reconstruct. During this time he has published more than ten books on the topic, including *El arte de la espera* (1998), *Isla sin fin* (1999), *José Martí: la invención de Cuba* (2000), *Tumbas sin sosiego* (2006), *El estante vacío* (2008), and *Motivos de Anteo* (2008). His work on Cuban and Latin American history has been recognized by important international awards, among them Matías Romero (2001), Anagrama (2006), and most recently the first Isabel Polanco International Essay Prize in Guadalajara (2010), for *Las repúblicas del aire: Utopía y desencanto en la revolución hispanoamericana*.

Born in Cuba in 1965, Rojas has taught and lectured at many universities in various parts of the world, including Cuba, Mexico, Spain, Ecuador, Puerto Rico, Argentina and the United States. Since 1997, after assuming exile in Mexico, he has held a position at the Center for Economic Research and Teaching in Mexico City. He was also one of the leading intellectuals behind the creation and promotion of *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* (Madrid), the most widely read journal of Cuban letters outside of Cuba. In 2007, he was a visiting professor at both Princeton and Columbia universities. His work has been mostly recognized in Latin America and Spain thus far, though some of his essays have been sporadically translated

¹ Rafael Rojas, *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

to English in the past few years. It could be said, however, that *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History* marks his official arrival to the English-speaking world. The book, a collection of seven essays with an introduction, offers a representative sample of his previous work, most of it culled from earlier books in Spanish. The translation process may seem surprising, however, since it features five different translators, including the author, for five chapters; the rest written directly in English by Rojas. Without a prefatory guide, the reader is left wondering about the confluence of disparate voices. Translation by committee also makes it more difficult to approximate the quality of the author's prose in his native language, one of his calling cards. Nonetheless, one discovers fluidity in the book's architecture, a creative engagement of social science and literary motifs inspired by nationalism, a will that seems to sustain it throughout, even at times of contradiction. Most importantly, the volume presents the English language reader with a glimpse of this author's passion for Cuban historiography. Amidst that body of readers, one suspects Cuban Americans will likely find in Rojas a key new interlocutor, a voice deeply enmeshed in Cuban affairs but honed by work in a third space, Mexico.

Each of the book's chapters, essays in their own right, deserves closer engagement, but first some comments about the volume's underlying framework. Foremost for Rojas is the idea that Cuba still has a future as a Republic after enduring so many difficult founding moments: independence from Spain, U.S. interventions, various attempts at republicanism encircled by local dictatorships, all of it culminating in a socialist revolution that left the nation split and ultimately adrift following the end of the Cold War, a time of disquieting uncertainty. The key to the future for Rojas will be the past, particularly 1940, the moment that established the Second Republic, the nation's true birth. That pursuit of an organic foundation will be informed by a type of intellectual history that the author deems necessary at this point in time. He calls it a "poetics of remembrance" that begins by placing Cuba in the context of post-socialist regimes in Eastern Europe, as well as Latin American post-military dictatorships, which have moved towards transition governments and national reconciliation. Equally important for him is the realization that

contemporary Cuban affairs, though still largely split along the lines of the exile-island divide after five decades, has imbued a large body of writing. Much of it has been framed as a traumatic war of memory claiming contentious truths about the past but Rojas believes it also reveals a fervent desire for nationalism. Moreover, he sees signs that this body of writing, largely composed of memoirs, autobiographies, some academic work and fiction of various genres, has increasingly turned more conciliatory on both sides of the Cuban split in the last decade or so. He thus feels that history is on the side of transition and reunification, even if it has not yet taken root amongst all Cubans. A framework is needed to guide this flow of memory discourses into a cohesive historical understanding that will ultimately yield a political will for a return to republicanism. The author will try to provide it.

As we also will see, Rojas's engagement with intellectual history begins and ends with literature, at times comfortably, at times snared in a knotted relationship that sets the stage for various questions as well as contradictions explored in detail later in this essay. The author's aim is to incorporate memory arts into a historical framework bound by nationalism. He is aware that historical understanding and the poetics of remembrance respond to different rigors, but he moves confidently from historiography proper to Cuba's literary canon and ultimately to the growing body of hybrid memoirs and autobiographies, trying to fill the gaps and intrinsic tensions between these modes of writing with various degrees of success. His basic chronology begins with two key periods in Cuba's history, 1902-1933 (First Republic) and 1933-1952 (Second Republic). They are sketched as background to the work of José Martí, Jorge Mañach, Fernando Ortiz and José Lezama Lima, canonical figures of international relevance. This is followed by a third period, 1959-1992 and beyond, corresponding to the Socialist State and its aftermath. This latter corpus is made up of remembrance texts, with an emphasis on the production of exilic memoirs of various types, ultimately leading to an examination of work calling for post-socialist and post-dictatorship transition. At times Rojas deploys a hermeneutic methodology of key authors, at times a thematic review of the pertinent bibliography, always following a diachronic line of Cuba's

republican history as the ultimate unifying subject. It is not just that Cuba, like many Latin American nations, equates the nation with literary modernity, but that literature allows him to closely construct the story of the nation as long as one can fit writers and their works neatly into that teleology. When it doesn't, when the lines between history and literature turn less cohesive, the model comes into crisis. These are perhaps the most revealing moments, as we will see. What follows will offer a closer look at this project with special attention to the author's pursuit of nationalist intellectual history by way of literary texts and memory discourses at this point in time.

Revisiting Martí

Contrary to common wisdom, the author warns, Jose Martí may not be the model or center around which to build the Cuban nation. Though revered by Cubans as the nation's founding father and seen as the key to Latin American modern history by many scholars throughout the world, Rojas aims to show the extraordinary disparity of political positions behind Jose Martí's canonization. He carefully examines the way in which the three key moments in Cuba's history (the two Republics and the Socialist State) anointed Martí as "The Apostle," a sacred figure for each narrative in spite of the deep national divisions they represent. One should specify here that for Rojas the First Republic led to failure but helped lay the foundation for the Second, which was and continues to be his model for the future. Rojas concludes that Martí belongs to none of these three founding moments because he died in 1895, seven years before the First Republic, thus he was not a player when independence arrived, much less afterward, when the history of new nation took its course. Yet each period built its foundation on skewed misreadings of this poet, a practice that has only intensified disunity and historical error. The aim is not to debunk Martí's importance altogether but to historicize its place in the modern nation. After a careful study of the latter's political philosophy Rojas deduces that in terms of 19th Century traditions one could think of "The Apostle" as republican—though not a liberal—who would have likely agreed and disagreed with ways in which each of the three subsequent periods

governed Cuba; a thinker, for example, capable of chastising the United States for its imperial design on the Americas while also praising its founding democratic principles. Martí is therefore cast in a dual light. He was an important prelude to the nation, particularly the First Republic, but not the guiding figure that will unify a future republic; his work inspires patriots of all stripes but also leads to deep divisions, equivocations and manipulations.

The focus on misreading will begin to unlock the most important aspect of *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*: its conflictive reliance on links between literature and political history. One should note that Rojas presents republicanism here and throughout the book as a singular and unquestioned teleology, even though he senses, at times that the relationship between national cultures, nation states, and political philosophy must traverse new entanglements. But these difficult questions—matters pertaining to race, language, governability and transnational flows of human and financial capital—will be either resolved by Cuban history during the Second Republic or sidestepped by Rojas in the name of the nation at a time of post-socialist transition. His look at Martí's oeuvre, therefore, will not entertain how literature and politics provide different modes of reading nationalism or lead to different concepts of history. The emphasis will be on the biographical timing of Martí, his proximity to the First Republic and its limitations, not whether his literature speaks to any other time or space. Excess meaning, a political limitation, will be brought back to the life of the author.

This mode of enclosure will lead to further questions and even contradictions regarding literature and history throughout the book. Martí's work no doubt yields ambiguity, as does the work of Rodó, Darío and other Latin American modernists. Their literary discourse corresponded to a new disciplinary realm of knowledge that informs but also exceeds strict republican teleology and its corresponding emplotment. In *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, a highly quoted work, Julio Ramos has argued that Martí and other figures of the time complicate the notion of intellectuals caught in the grid of "the lettered city," a space in which the logic of state, often

still colonial, provided an overarching meaning to the work of writers and other intellectuals consolidating or forging Latin American republics. Writing such as Martí's corresponded to a literary modernity that ensued from a relatively autonomous sphere of knowledge that exceeds unifying themes, a polysemic alignment of writing and historical understanding brought about by new cultural and economic forces. If so, if literature allows that type of difficult but enriching understanding, it suggests a different framework for modern history as it pertains to writing. One can observe, with Rojas, that Martí's legacy has led to much ideological manipulation, but one could also conceive a different approach to his ongoing presence in literature and history, an equivocal richness that surpasses biographical chronologies.

Biopolitics and Creole Order

Technically speaking, Cuba was born with independence, thus giving rise to the First Republic (1902-1933) in Rojas's formulation. It was, however, a moment fraught with seemingly insurmountable obstacles, including the intervening presence of the United States. For the author, however, the ensuing debate over race and civilizational models may have been the deepest threat to the nation's stability. As he puts it, the war of independence, in military terms, was relatively short-lived compared to the politically more costly "war of discourses" fought by "the intellectual and political elites of the island" (25). Rojas will identify these republican elites as white Creoles caught in a self-defeating debate about racial and civilizational models on which to found a modern nation. In that pursuit, they viewed Cuba's Hispanic and African American populations negatively to different degrees. The discourse of eugenics will thus occupy a central role at this moment of the nation's history, as will a confusion of civilizational with racial models. It is, ultimately, another chapter in the history of racialized policies prevalent in Latin America throughout the 19th Century and into the 20th, but all the more heightened by the profound significance of Cuba's black population, a constitutive key to its formation, not only in cultural terms but also in the struggle for independence. Grounding a civic model based on a white Creole background was therefore

a contradictory pursuit, given the latter's deep-seated fear of African national ancestry, as well as its own self doubts about the Hispanic culture's disposition toward modernity. Sociology and anthropology informed this conflictive grounding in various ways, particularly through the early work of Fernando Ortiz, as well as through nascent political discourses that attempted to conquer these intractable obstacles for the new Cuban Republic.

Rojas carefully charts the weight of eugenics in 19th century debates throughout the Americas, describing the prevalence of racist ideology at the root of the nation. Moreover, he acknowledges the limitations of this debate for the Cuban Republic; how difficult, if not impossible, it was to move past these confused views over races and civilizations while still caught in the language of eugenics or in discourses imbued by positivistic paradigms. This begins to set the stage for the work of Fernando Ortiz, the renowned Cuban anthropologist, which Rojas frames in a subsequent chapter as the true protagonist of Cuban modernity and whose theory of transculturation opened the way for multiracial national politics. Rojas emphasizes that Ortiz's ultimately moved past the racialized discourse of the First Republic but that his early work was snared by it. Eugenics had to be conquered but its persistent force requires attention. To do this Rojas invokes Foucault's concept of "biopolitics," quoting the latter's "inscription of racism in the mechanisms of state" (29), as background, not only to Cuba but to Latin American eugenicist thinking during the 19th Century. Rojas, however, implies that this biopolitical terrain belonged to a past awaiting resolution within a national order enlightened by transculturation. He avoids the deeper layer of biopolitics that only intensified in the 20th Century for Foucault and many other thinkers, indeed it became a term to describe how modern and even neoliberal nation states organized control of populations. In a recent reading of Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, a book stemming from his 1979 seminar by that title, Michael Hardt argues that the biopolitical included not only race but sexual behaviors, medical practices, and even economic paradigms. As such, it opens an analysis on contemporary regimes of all sorts, including neoliberalism, a realm in which states are no longer the primary locus of power given that the latter

are now supervised by markets. In that light, a post-socialist republic such as the one envisioned by Rojas will likely require a more concrete argument on how transculturation engages racial policy in contemporary Cuba and its Diaspora.

Ajiaco and Transculturation

The Second Republic summoned a new direction for Cuba even though it only lasted 19 years, from 1933 to 1952. The following period 1952-1959, a seven-year hiatus corresponding to the Batista dictatorship, is not included in Rojas's periodization. Beyond that, the Second Republic is carefully portrayed. It crystallized in 1940, a year that brought together a progressive constitution, the publication of Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*, a wealth of historical research on the nation by Cuban scholars inspired by new methods and, equally important, the vanguard role of the journal *Avance* in Cuban national politics, an outlet for democratic policies aided by the figure of Jorge Mañach, an essayist whose pragmatic ideals helped coalesce all of these forces. This conjuncture of scholarship, legislative articulation and political action brings modernity to Cuba. It is a strong argument on the part of Rojas. Aided by Ortiz's insights, the Creole obsession with race was reoriented towards national culture, away from eugenics and civilizational models. The new impetus reached the realm of politics buttressed by the new constitution and the activism of *Avance* and Mañach. The Republic is finally born, although one should add that the question of race is not discussed past this point of his periodization.

A turn toward politics will be crucial to understand 1940 but the author insists on culture as the key agent. He is fully aware of postmodern critiques on transculturation and perhaps sees the need to defend it given its importance for his understanding of Cuba's intellectual history. Contrary to models of hybridity and cultural studies that Rojas considers flawed, he argues for the ongoing relevance of transculturation as a method grounded on social scientific principles, with its focus on history and migration, yielding a national integrative model open to racial differences equal to the challenge of true cosmopolitan citizenship. Rojas stakes a

theoretical claim within contemporary discourses at this point, indicating that the Cuban nation need not go any further than Ortiz and 1940 on this account. It can just build on its own transculturation theory as the most conducive terrain for demarcating multiracial national subjectivity. It is clearly a formulation that aims to place Ortiz, rather than Martí, as the true center of the modern nation: a social scientist, not a poet, who transforms the discipline of anthropology and the eugenicist episteme, a witness to the republic's constitutive moments able to transfer his organic culturalist understanding into a unifying political frame.

The deeper layers of this argument will of course warrant further consideration. Did transculturation transform or eradicate the Cuban Creole episteme? To what degree did the latter continue to define national culture for the Batista dictatorship, the Socialist Republic and the exile communities? Rojas intuits the ongoing importance of this topic, but only in a theoretical sense, less concerned with contemporary Cuban history than with an opportunity for a theoretical debate on contemporary multiculturalism, insisting that the latter is informed by misguided notions that may be more prone to racialization than transculturation proper. It is, of course, a terrain calling for precision. Rojas paints hybridity discourses with a broad stroke, dispensing with a closer look at key sources such as Edouard Glissant or Homi Bhabha, both of whom hold pertinence to Caribbean contexts. Instead one finds an insistence on Ortiz's as a visionary whose theory, if properly understood, trumps the criticisms directed at his work by a loosely defined field of cultural studies.

For Rojas, the historical concern with race and national politics in Cuba seems to end with the 1940's and Fernando Ortiz. If anything, transculturation is cast as model for other nations, particularly as "ajiaco" (thick Cuban soup of multiple ingredients) theory, a renaming that suggests a more ludic conceptual plane closer to postmodern fashioning. One should add, however, that new books on Caribbean cultural history such as Sybille Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed*, deeply committed to historical argumentation in their own way, continue to question Ortiz's "culturalist narrative," its "imagery of absorption and incorporation within the national

territory,” a discourse in which “culture has taken on the role of politics as the vehicle for resolving divisions” (297).

Nihilism and Margins

One of the most intriguing moments of *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History* may be found in the chapter “Orígenes and the Poetics of History.” The narrative up to now had featured the arrival of the Second Republic but gave no clear sign of the reasons why it ended so quickly. This chapter provides a sketch of the shadows lurking over that promise. It is traced to the literary journal *Orígenes*, founded by a group of influential writers, among which the poet José Lezama Lima looms largest. Together they constituted a countervailing influence, inspired by a nihilistic literary tradition that refused to accept the direction of the Second Republic. They clung instead to a poetic utopia mixed with a brand of anti-US imperialism that ultimately turned prophetic: their hopes and expectations found a referent of sorts in the Socialist State that replaced Cuban republicanism. As Rojas explains it, they cultivated the notion of *insilio*, as opposed to *exilio*, when faced with national crisis. This notion, an internal, poetic, secret space, turned into an insipid founding doubt of anti-republicanism, a blockage of the movement from First to Second Republic, a gravitation to the margin of the political project sponsored by *Avance*, Mañach, and national transculturation. The *origenistas* became lyrical rather than political subjects at this key moment, “republican orphans” who refused to be part of a relay they viewed as caught in a cycle of sameness for Cuba. As Rojas remarks, they understood participation in public affairs as “a communion with the possible poetical images, not an attendance to the everyday political state.” The state, for them, conjured an image of “*nihil admirari*, the coat of arms of most ancient decadence”(90).

Poetic disdain for political subjectivity may explain why Rojas’s critique of this movement will seem harsh at times. At one point he chastises Virgilio Piñera, a highly acclaimed writer and member of *Orígenes*, for nurturing “a fatal ontological doubt with regards to the existence of Cuba as a nation” (68), a notion that could only spell “subversive immanence, perverse and terribly resistant to all forms of

authority” (74). The difficult relationship between literature and history sustained by Rojas becomes somewhat unstable at this point. He is generally comfortable reviewing literature, knows how to mine it well, but finds first in Martí and then in Lezama a language that resists clear-cut historical representation of political content. The case of Martí, at the dawn of the new nation, was still steeped enough in politics to facilitate Rojas’s reading, but with Lezama he must contend with a poet whose life and work could not be farther removed from the political. This explains the use of nihilism to depict reluctance towards politics on the part of *Orígenes* at the time of the Second Republic. The problem for Rojas, however, is compounded by the implicit political promise also held by this group of writers, their desire for a utopian space beyond a history of failed republicanism, which he sees as prophesizing the Socialist State. In that compounded sense, historical as much as nihilistic, there was an alternative nationalism also at play in the work of *Orígenes*, but it amounted to a breach, a negative force that saw itself in the context of orphanhood, refusing to recognize the filial groundwork laid by the Second Republic. It is perhaps this alternative nationalism that concerns Rojas the most, because it prophesized and then found inspiration in the subsequent Socialist State, which does not qualify as republican. Lezama thus becomes a prophet for an uncontainable immanence that proves untrustworthy to the republic. As Rojas concludes in near apocalyptic tone: “Then the Revolution dismantled the Republic, whose weightlessness and hollowness had already been expressed in the poetics of *Orígenes*”(83).

The place of literature in matters of state comes to the surface here in all its contradictory force. It can’t be avoided but it must be contained. Rojas is emphatic on this matter, offering perhaps the strongest evidence in Lezama’s definition of public space as “a tattooed reality where one floats in the mundane bargains of positive politics” (88). Such a concept, strictly understood as a rejection of democracy, or as a naïve desire for a future government capable of totalitarian rule, fuels Rojas’s consternation. Yet there may be other readings of this extraordinary citation. Seen in light of foreign interventions and internal dictatorships surrounding the First Republic, it may also suggest that the group *Orígenes* had little faith in

political reform. Echoes of this reading could be found in *Cintio Vitier: La memoria integrada*, a book about another important *Orígenes* figure, authored by Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, a Puerto Rican scholar quoted by Rojas in other contexts. Díaz Quiñones takes a closer look at the link between poetics and the desire for revolution in the group's work, framing it in terms of the language of poetry and republican frustration, a context that need not necessarily find its historical referent in the Cuban Socialist State, even if it followed it chronologically. Beyond that, one could read Lezama's seemingly nihilistic understanding of public space as a way of questioning nation state teleology as a universal value beyond history, an interrogation that seems particularly pertinent today. Nationalisms or regionalisms do not exhaust the possibilities of public space and political subjectivity for Lezama. His work inspires a different practice of affiliation, as suggested by recent books such as Juan Duchesne's *Del príncipe moderno al señor barroco: la república de la amistad en Paradiso de José Lezama Lima*.

A Canon Equal to the Nation

As outlined earlier, Rojas's chronology leaves the 1952-1959 period dangling with the nihilistic challenge of *Orígenes*. At this point, his attention does not move back to history but rather to literature, in this case canon formation, perhaps the most paradigmatic form of staging the ways in which literature and history come together in the pursuit of a politics. Rojas treads carefully and comprehensively through this terrain. He is aware that, as with Jose Martí's work, creating a literary canon is a process of inclusion and exclusion, a splitting along the lines of friend and foe driven by aesthetic as well as ideological interests. He reviews the literature looking for general tendencies, in this case showing that in the history of Cuban canon formation one can find various tendencies, some more willing to account for difference than others. In the end, however, they all reveal partiality at the expense of true national integration, his ultimate pursuit. One can see Rojas juggling with a terrain that is both necessary but inherently conflictive to his project. Canon formation makes a monument out of national history, but it is ultimately exclusionary. Even Harold

Bloom's *Western Canon*, which lists an extraordinarily high number of Cuban writers, comes under review to illustrate that it too engages in understandable levels of arbitrariness.

A review of the axis of inclusion and exclusion in Cuban canon formation will bring Rojas to observe one of its most persistent features: defining Cuban literature as Latin American at the expense of its Caribbean bearings. The author signals this ongoing negative disposition towards Caribbean models of association but, once again, only in terms of the past, with no mention of what it portends for a future Cuban Republic in the twenty first century. At one point he states that Arcadio Díaz Quiñones "reminds us constantly" of a history of Cuban grievances with Puerto Rico, but no specifics are provided (98). At another moment he remarks that *La isla que se repite*, by Antonio Benítez Rojo, is "the only book written by a Cuban that purports to read the culture as if it were already inscribed in the Caribbean context," but the concept is not discussed (96). He seems to bemoan the absence of Caribbean contextualization on the part of Cuban history, but offers little on why it remains a consistent trait of Cuban writing, in exile as well as the island, long after Mañach and the Second Republic. Perhaps the Creole tradition remains at play in Cuban letters, but he leaves it significantly unaddressed. More importantly, Rojas misses the point that Benítez Rojo's book comprises, in spite of its undeniable value, largely a Cuban-centered reading of the Caribbean, or that its understanding of history could not be farther from Rojas's, given that it casts modernity and its politics as violent enterprises inimical to the area's cultural strengths.

In the end, the essay reveals a deep ambivalence toward canon formation; it dreads its limitations almost as much as it values its capacity to showcase nationalist longings. Rojas concludes that a canon ultimately "imposes a national identity on us" while cautioning that a counter canon based on the "archeological substrata of women's, gay's, black, dissident, or minority literatures" carries the danger of "redefining the national from within undervalued, marginal, forgotten or rebel discourses"(113). Both are exclusionary, though perhaps one is more valued than the other. His misgivings toward the literary canon must therefore confront his desire for

it; such is the force of an archive capable of monumentalizing national history.

The Perils of Transition

Essays in Cuban Intellectual History concludes with two essays that move closer to the present. The time of the Cuban Revolution comes now into view, as does the first moment of Cuban exile—later a full-fledged Diaspora—both of which commenced in 1959. The author does not dwell on the history of either side or their respective claims on truth, often absolute, but he does insist on calling their relationship a civil war. This might be somewhat surprising, given that the timing and scope of military conflicts between the Cuban Revolution and its early exile community—the brief Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and sporadic guerrilla scimmages in the Escambray Mountains during the sixties—hardly warrant that description. But perhaps he aims to dramatize the fierce ideological battles among Cubans fueled by the geopolitics of the Cold War, a constellation of symbolic forces now more than five decades old. In any event, the 1990's brought a pause to that long-lasting clash, hence the author's attempt to look back on it as a narrative of remembrance. The territory to be covered will be memory rather than military clashes, the grounds for reflection and exploration of loss, an archive of thoughts and feelings left in the wake a Cuban national split. Post-socialist transition thus presents an opportunity to traverse differences, outline points of convergence, propose modes of adjudication and foster a return to national oneness based on the Second Republican model.

Forgiveness will always be a thorny topic for a nation so severed by history, but Rojas takes it on board confidently, with a comprehensive look at many sources, some willing to forego recrimination more than others. He shows evidence that both sides—Cuba and *el exilio*—have begun to soften their respective position toward each other for different reasons and to differing degrees. While official stances continue to show intransigence, the end of Soviet-style socialism and the Latin Americanization of Miami, among other causes, have brought the Cuban Revolution and its exile community face to face with their respective, and perhaps unexpected,

transitions. A changing disposition towards the other is evident in memoirs, *testimonios*, autobiographies, film, internet activity, some journalism, literary criticism, lettered social science work, contacts between artists and various frameworks calling for national reconciliation. Rojas reviews these memory discourses with optimistic eyes, though he emphasizes a much greater commitment to them on the part of exiles than in the island. This is accurate to a degree but in need of further context.

Exile groups in favor of dialogue with the Revolution have actually existed since the 1970's, though they were then seen in Miami as an aberration, if not a form of treason. In time, with more recent arrival of exiles and new generations of Cuban Americans, these views became more acceptable but they continue to have little impact on the political map of Miami and the state of Florida. Television, radio, and print journalism indicate a clear-cut propensity to foster ultra conservative party affiliation but the author seems less familiar with this telling vector of contemporary politics than with exile memoirs that focus on loss and the idea Cuban oneness. Yet, among Cuban Americans interested in opening relations with Cuba, the question of nationalism reveals adherence to multiple languages and identities and hence a more complex understanding of transition and nation-state formation. This is not to deny the turn towards remembrance that Rojas describes, evidenced without a doubt in various forms of academic work among exiles. But even those narratives of loss deserve a closer reading. One must consider, for instance, that exile authors whose lives are firmly rooted elsewhere, who no longer write in Spanish or have no plans of returning to the island, may harbor an idea of the nation caught in a different prescription.

The political map within Cuba during this time of transition yields greater specificity. The author begins by pointing out a growing sense among independent intellectuals and other entities that "the political system in Cuba can be transformed from the inside by its own actors and institutions" (126). More specifically, he signals 1992 as the key date in post-socialist Cuba, given the constitutional reform that came that year, as well as subsequent changes such as "the decriminalization of the dollar, the reopening of the agriculture and livestock markets, the authorization of

self-employment, mixed foreign investment schemes, the reduction of the communist party's professional cadres, and the development of tourism and remittances as the national economy's first steps toward integration"(141). While these measures may come and go without warning as the regime continues to control the economy and repress political opposition, they do indicate an opening of sorts. In political terms, Rojas observes a move from totalitarian to authoritarian rule; in philosophical terms, he sees "the abandonment of Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology and the re-adoption of revolutionary nationalism as regime doctrine" (141). This shift could perhaps find its best illustration within the cultural scene. In the sixties and seventies, during the more triumphant days of socialist internationalism, Cuba was more willing to decouple itself from its cultural past, if not disdain it as a bourgeois representation; after 1989 it has return to revalue it, as evident in widely acclaimed films such as "Fresa y Chocolate."

Still, if revolutionary nationalism has been readopted, one wonders how it may play out in the republican path traced by Rojas. Is this type of nationalism unique or just another name for a return to the republican tradition? Has the "revolutionary" signifier lost all its significance during post-socialist transition? The topic calls for these and other questions pertaining to the place of nation in contemporary states. A closer look at Rojas's periodization suggests that neither the Socialist State nor the Diaspora qualify as placeholder for the Cuban Republic. The former has been committed to a different episteme of the nation; the latter resides in the territory of another republic. One must therefore conclude that the Cuban Republic has been vacated for more than fifty years, even if nationalism has thrived within these entities. If so, nationalism may require framing as a plurality, in territorial and cultural terms. Rojas seems aware of this when he observes that "although since 1992 Cuba has experienced ideological flexibility similar to that of the Asian countries, tense relations with the U.S. government and the Miami exile community, as well as the Communist Party's lack of institutional consistency and the timidity of its economic reforms, distinguish Cuba from the reformed socialism and state capitalisms of Asia" (142). This brief description reminds us of the Cold

War and its role in the Cuban national split, a knotted web of history coupling the interests of the United States, the Revolution's and those of the settled exile enclave, a conjunction of elements still very much at play which has not only produced discourses of remembrance and nostalgia among Cubans; it has also created new social entities with unique characteristics and a considerable degree of permanence. One might therefore pause before speculating on what type of the nation-state formation awaits Cubans, or how their multiple forms of cultural nationalism will traverse their respective languages and territories, not to speak of their respective racial and class composition, which are significantly different.

Rojas intuits these complications, in passing, including the notion that there might be a Caribbean context pertinent to Cuba's future, given the area's conflicted history of nation-state formation, but he is not inclined to consider it seriously, perhaps because it will imperil his republican model, perhaps because he sees the future from the viewpoint of a relatively recent émigré who still harbors the hope of a wholesome return. His focus will therefore stick to the promise of transition, with the Asian and European post-socialism model on one hand, and Southern Cone post-dictatorships on the other. The first hurdle for such a transition will be a historical accounting of criminal claims against both sides, a task that requires a "double exercise of memory" to adjudicate possible human rights violations by both, the Cuban government and the violent opposition (150). Once that is accomplished, the process will depend on the commitment by both sides to renounce violence, deploy culture as bridge, recognize the legitimacy of all groups and perhaps reestablish a truly pluralist national heritage able to take on board the multiplicity of Cuban nationalist manifestations. In terms of policy planning, these are hopeful and reasonable steps, but they seem to only focus on the changes awaiting Cuba, suggesting once again the general idea of a political return to oneness, as if the Diaspora were meant to disappear or cease to have a claim on the future of its own memory. Equally important is the absence of economics in this transition model, given that market-driven policies will likely override all other considerations in Cuba's future: Asian reformed

socialism and new state economies, cited by Rojas in passing, are not discussed in terms of their possibilities for Cuba, but one wonders why, particularly in the context of crisis fueled by the failure of finance capitalism. In short, the notion of transition may have thickened considerably since the 1990's, as political frameworks find themselves yielding to a sense of market immanence that has little if any precedent.

Recent economic history charts unsuspected paths for nation states but it will not deter the author's attention from the promise of European post-socialist transition. In that pursuit, Rojas will shift research grounds at this point, from the realm of discursive arts committed to creative retrospection—literature and memoirs—to the promise of social science work more inclined to gather data and formulate policy models based on truth commissions and internationally-sponsored settings for dialogue. An action-oriented method, partially inspired by the philosophical work of Habermas, will be deemed necessary if the power of remembrance is to be harnessed into a framework that paves the way back to the Republic. The intellectual historian thus turns more pragmatic. Many key questions remain unaddressed in this plan, as we have seen, but the call to action will be of special importance, for it constitutes a telling departure filled with as much angst as certainty, in terms of recasting the links between literature and history that had been deployed thus far.

The Other Republic

The move from past to future, from remembrance to transition, brings into play a new approach no longer driven by hermeneutics. Intellectual history had been the province of literary arts thus far; even the chapters on Fernando Ortiz's anthropological insights were framed as part of Cuba's lettered tradition awaiting intricate readings. Instead, the act of reading will now summon an exacting sense of realism committed to action that must put to rest once and for all history's reliance on literature: "Before gravitating once more toward the idea of literature as a mythic refuge against History, it is better to search for redemption in Geography. Writing as the construction of specific places (the Havana of Cabrera Infante; the homoerotic beach of Arenas; the Miami of Pérez Firmat) at

least offer the possibility of a community ruled by the pleasure principle. In these literary spaces, History reveals its disconcerting domesticity and dries up its fountain of infernal myths” (119). This is no doubt a striking manifestation of a conflict that could be seen brewing throughout the entire book. Literature had been a necessary reservoir of nationalist sentiment to be harnessed, at times even relished for its symbolic power, even though its “nihilistic” immanence always loomed in the background, a force that could lead the nation astray if not brought under control by Rojas’s narrative. This blueprint is first seen in the reading of Martí and then in the chapter on Lezama, whose work, along with that of *Orígenes*, came under suspicion for having aroused a sense of nihilism capable of thwarting the democratic promise of the Second Republic and welcoming the Socialist State.

The concept of transition thus gathers further definition, as it moves from geopolitical concerns to the politics of writing. Its focus will be the local, the specific, and the domestic planes of reference, a direct pact between language and place, things and words, a national geographic inscription that must turn away from literature’s mythological or universal aspirations. As transition opens the door to action, the author will mark “History” in capital letters, casting it as a drying power over the infernal literary well. The tense but deep-seated lettered tradition that held the nation in concert suddenly turns futile, a legacy with more peril than promise. Neither the Socialist State nor the Diasporic community presented insuperable barriers to post-socialist transition; such was the promise of diplomacy and adjudication among conflicting factions. Literature, however, that other republic of the arts, does get in the way, in the deepest and perhaps most classic sense. As one can readily observe, Plato’s banishing of the poets could not come closer to the following proclamation:

The perception that literature performs a kind of magic state against history, and that it will protect the individual from the outside world is not exactly beneficial for all cultures. In the case of Cuba, this reification of letters—which extends from Heredia to Casal, Martí to Lezama, and Villaverde to Cabrera Infante—arises from a nihilist heritage, developed over two centuries of political frustration. Today, the ridiculous nature of certain aristocratic poses in the ruins of some city is only equivalent to the cynicism with which

many intellectuals adhere to the worst policies within and outside the island. (119)

The severity of this dictum may surprise readers, particularly in a book so committed to nuanced transactions among Cubans of all stripes. But there may be ways of explaining it after all. Cuba's literary tradition, in and out of the island, has only gained stature during the past half century while the nation split into a diasporic plurality, an outcome that must concern Rojas for it portends a radical decoupling of the otherwise expected proximity between national literature and native land. Beyond this geographic mode of dispersal, the specter of Lezama continues to loom in the horizon larger than ever, its richness as an elusive signifier having only intensified in the last few decades, as his stature grew in the field of Latin American and world literature. One speaks of him today in the same breath as Borges. Moreover, the past few decades were also a time of literary triumphalism and postmodern theoretical proliferation, a disciplinary shift armed with deconstructive pursuits that seemed uninterested in "the political" as such, even though it aimed to transform it with a different philosophy of language. All of this could conceivably frustrate a political project seeking to unify nationalist longings dispersed across states, languages, and history. Literature, the main exhibit of the intellectual history narrated by Rojas, is deemed unreliable for the task at hand.

Yet, perhaps Rojas misdiagnoses the situation, for the absence of the political, its emptying out, may actually be an unsuspected feature of the time of transition he otherwise covets. More than political philosophy, markets govern the new *telos* of post 1989 transitions. This constitutes a realm of knowledge filled with its own sense of immanence in which republican or national interests occupy a second plane at best. In that light, to yearn for a time when political discourses occupied center stage in the course of history may prove as elusive as expecting literature to yield only geographic knowledge. If so, post-socialist transition may not really provide the clear path to the Second Cuban Republic but rather a leap to the future which must take into account the way in which the nation-state relationship is deconstructed by market teleology, perhaps the primary site

of biopolitical understanding that Rojas introduced earlier, though confined to the topic of transculturation in the 1940's. Beyond that, there lies the fertile but uncertain terrain of Cuban literature and history, a link no longer willing to yield national politics, or perhaps even history, as usual. Banishing the poets will not likely return it.

Post-socialist transition will not be exempt from literary duplicity any more, or perhaps even less, than other periods of history, but Rojas's elaborate attempt to think of it in those terms offers room for thought, particularly as it pertains to questions of language and methods of reading. The latter gain prominence the deeper one gets into his work, to a degree that the reader must ask if it has more to do with disciplinary debates than with Cuba as such. This may seem surprising given the author's aim to draw a direct line from past to future but the object of study can entangle itself with the premises that create it, yielding other and perhaps unexpected references. If so, one could safely conclude that *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History* offers ample evidence that Cuban nationalism will remain fertile ground for our deepest intellectual quandaries. In that sense, in its rich array of hope, contradiction and fear, one must welcome the arrival of this book.

Works Cited

- Díaz Quiñonez, Arcadio. *Cintio Vitier: La memoria integradora*. San Juan, PR: Sin Nombre, 1987.
- Fischer, Sybille. *Modernity Disavowed*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Duchense, Juan Ramón. *Del príncipe moderno al señor barroco: la república de la amistad en Paradiso de José Lezama Lima*. Cali: Archivos del Índice, 2008.
- Hardt, Michael. "Militant Life," *New Left Review*, 64 (July/Aug 2010).
- Ramos, Julio. *Divergent Modernities*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Rojas, Rafael. *Essays in Cuban Intellectual History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.